



Vernal USGS study - news
Carol Russell to: Darcy Campbell, Judy Bloom

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Chyn
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County OKs water system study
By Mary Bernard, Vernal Express

County officials authorized funding for a U.S Geological Survey three-year study of the Ashley Valley's karst water system. Karst aquifers are solid rock where underground fissures, fractures, caves, and conduits connect a network of openings that store water, according to the USGS.

Unanimous approval of the proposal, along with \$300,000 in financial support, was voted by the Uintah County Commission on Jan. 7.

Roughly 40 percent of the funding will come from the USGS itself, with the remainder drawn from the Revitalization Fund.

Interest in the valley's water system arose last spring when Agrium Inc. and its subsidiary, the Utah Phosphate Company, announced plans to develop mining leases in the area of the Ashley Springs.

Almost all local drinking water comes from the Ashley Springs and, as a sole-source aquifer, a detailed study of the karst water system is needed, according to the commissioners.

The objective of the USGS study is to describe the ground water system interconnection, identify the rock formations that permit the underground flow of water, and define the potential affects of mine-blasting activities on the springs and karst system.

The U.S. Geological Survey conducts research of karst aquifers across the country, tracking the nation's groundwater resources.

"In the United States, about 40 percent of the groundwater used for drinking comes from karst aquifers," cites the USGS website.

Vernal City depends on the Ashley Springs and karst water system for about 95 percent of their water, city manager Ken Bassett was quoted as saying at a meeting last October.

Officials, moving to develop protections for the local water system, admit the three-year schedule of the USGS study is a bit of a

drawback.

In the interim, a buffer zone is proposed for the “ground and surface water from Dry Fork Sinks to around the Ashley Springs,” said Commissioner Mark Raymond.

The commission and county attorney are in the process of developing a protection ordinance that will encompass the water sources in roughly a two-mile radius.

“We anticipate the protective buffer will restrict mine activities in much of the area that (Agrium and Utah Phosphate) are interested in,” said Commissioner Mike McKee, saying it should be finalized shortly.

The Utah Phosphate Company’s permitted exploratory work and seismic testing on their leases was completed on Oct. 12, 2012.

Work on the potential mine leases has been suspended since the fall and is expected to resume in the spring.

Carol Russell

Carol Russell
U.S. EPA Region 8 - EPR-EP
1595 Wynkoop
Denver, CO 80202

303-312-6310
russell.carol@epa.gov